

PROSPECT,

OR

View of the Moral World,

BY ELIHU PALMER.

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No. IV.

In spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear, whatever is, is right.

POPE.

POPE in his essay on man has presented to the human mind moral and theological ideas of vast importance, the qualities and characters of human beings in their relative positions were essential to the discriminating views, and the deductions which he made upon the most interesting subjects. The physical and the moral world were equally exposed to the activity of his mind, and his maxims in many respects contain a comprehensiveness which nothing can exceed. The Jewish and personified divinity resembling so exactly the shape and form of a man, and in full possession of his malignant passions, was in the estimation of this philosophical poet a nonentity, a creature of human imagination. Pope, altho' perhaps tinctured with the superstition of the day, saw with great clearness, the powers and activity of the material universe, for he says,

All are but parts of one stupendous whole,
Whose body nature is, and God the Soul.

The respect which he paid to moral principle was not less sincere or less visible than that which he bestowed upon the energy of the physical universe. But notwithstanding the strong attachment which we entertain for his essay on man, we believe at the same time, that some of the sentiments therein contained possess a hostile character, relative to the moral interests of human society. When philosophers coincide with fanatics, their doctrines become questionable—their opinions carry in them a suspicious appearance, and ought to be examined. It is true that philosophy and religious enthusiasm may sometimes coincide—but the case is rare.

Paul preaches in the name of heaven the doctrine of predestination, and Pope preaches in the name of philosophy the same doctrine. Pope has been followed and supported by many respectable writers of the same opinion—among whom are Priestley and Godwin; men justly celebrated in the present age for talents and learning—for acuteness of investigation and accuracy of reasoning upon subjects of the first importance. But there are maxims of a moral nature clearly deducible from the powers and character of man, which ought to triumph over all the scripture doctrines of predestination, and the metaphysical ingenuity of philosophers. Every accurate observer of principle must recognize a just discrimination between that which is good and that which is bad. Actions of an opposite cast and tendency ought never to be blended together—they possess inherently a distinct character, and excite as they ought very different emotions and decisions. When we say that acts of justice and benevolence are right, our expression is correct—but when we say that murder, cruelty, and inhumanity are right, our expressions are at war with truth and the happiness of society. When we say that whatever is, is right, we include actions of every description, vicious as well as virtuous—all distinction is levelled, and man perceives no exalted point of excellence on which he is permitted to bestow the applause of his understanding. Paul calls in to his aid the sovereign, and arbitrary powers of his God—necessitarian philosophers, the irresistible imperiousness of motives upon the faculties and views of human nature. But in every just condemnation for vicious actions, the motive as well as the action is justly criminated. If it were otherwise the culprit in a court of justice while he admitted the iniquity of the action according to the tenor of the law, might plead the irresistibility of motive to ward off the charge which had been brought against him. This would be just; for if men can no more resist moral motives than they can physical force, there is an end to the name of human virtue, and man can possess no more merit than any common machine. The truth is that our actions are subjected to our own controul—we possess a moral choice and are responsible for the good or bad use we make of it. If ever man becomes an enlightened and virtuous being, it will be by teaching him to repose in his faculties an unqualified confidence, and to believe he can accomplish every thing instead of nothing.

MORAL PHILOSOPHY.

THE conduct of human beings ought to be regulated by principles just and useful. The source of these principles is essentially interwoven with the character of man; his moral position in life, his powers and the general properties of his existence constitute the fundamental basis of enquiry and deduction. Theological superstition has taught lessons of dreadful heresy—it has instructed man to believe that he ought to depart from the present world to procure for himself joys suitable to the character of his present existence. The philosophy of which we speak has provided for man a variety of comforts in his present predicament, and this philosophy instructs him to diminish by intellectual exertion, the force of evil by which his life is afflicted. It teaches him that the ills of life are not always real but frequently fabricated from causes of a trifling nature. There is not perhaps on earth a human being who does not make more of his misfortunes than he ought—there is not one who does not magnify beyond the reality!—The human imagination is always awake, it is perpetually active, and to its combinations, conjectures, and anticipations, there seems to be no fixed termination. An evil apprehended, but not yet realised, often assumes a shape as terrific as the most dreadful calamity which has already burst in thunder upon the world. Earthquakes and volcanos sometimes happen—they happen really in the order of the universe—but how much more frequent are they in the imaginary apprehensions of human beings. The true point of wisdom is to regulate conduct by principle, to controul passion by reason, elevate the mind above common prejudices, to discard superstition, to love truth, and practice an incorruptible virtue.

*Your old Men shall dream dreams, your young ones
shall see Visions.*

JOEL, Chap. 2. Verse 28.

THE more the *holy scriptures* are examined the more they become vulnerable in the estimation of reason. The points of view in which they present themselves either in a questionable or reprehensible state are almost without number. The physical laws of nature are broken down, the character of God aspersed and every where exhibiting the most shame-

ful departures from that elevated line of conduct which reason teaches him to pursue. Dreams, prophecies, visions, and spectres form essential ingredients in the character of what is called divine revelation. Joseph is said to have been warned of God in a dream, to fly with Mary into Egypt and to take with them the divine infant who was destined through much suffering and tribulation to become the saviour of an apostate and wicked world. Every one who has reflected at all upon the properties, temperament and materials of which human nature is composed, must perceive with indubitable clearness that no reliance can be placed upon dreams or dreamers—that of all the effects of imagination or of mind, dreams are the most uncertain, and the most monstrous—that such heterogeneous combinations of intellect and of fancy could never be employed by the supreme creator to direct his creatures in the performance of duty. This bible system of religion however has set the whole world a dreaming from the days of the prophets down to the present time. The old men still continue to dream dreams and the young men to see visions—yes, and old women and young women too, and what is worse than all the rest, they make these flights of a half sleeping and half waking imagination the ground of serious decisions very destructive to happiness in the course of human life. A woman dreams that her husband is lost at sea, and as she reposes special confidence in this mode of prediction she renders herself and family wretched for several weeks or months till events shall prove the fallacy of her apprehensions, and if by chance it should once happen that the dream was verified, it forms the basis of the most unqualified reliance forever afterward. If after this the orthodoxy of dreams should be called in question, it is denounced as a damnable heresy, and the authority of sacred scripture is quoted to demonstrate the truth of the opinion.—The same may be said of witches and witchcraft—the witch of Endor, that great grandmother of witches has produced a numerous progeny, and were it not that the cultivation of reason has in this case put the blush upon credulous fanaticism we should never hear the last of that monstrous crime which includes in it a denial of witches and witchcraft.—Reason is the true guide to human action, and so long as we are dreaming away our existence and bewitching our faculties with theological nonsense of a supernatural kind, we shall be incapable of those lofty conceptions of mind, of the practice of those elevated virtues which constitute the true dignity and compleat the moral glory of human existence.

THE PROGRESS OF THE CHRISTIAN RELIGION.

(Continued from our last.)

I. **W**E have already described the religious harmony of the ancient world, and the facility with which the most different and even hostile nations embraced, or at least respected each other's superstitions. A single people refused to join in the common intercourse of mankind. The Jews, who, under the Assyrian and Persian monarchies, had languished for many ages the most despised portion of their slaves, emerged from obscurity under the successors of Alexander; and as they multiplied to a surprising degree in the East, and afterwards in the West, they soon excited the curiosity and wonder of other nations. The sudden obstinacy with which they maintained their peculiar rites and unsocial manners, seemed to mark them out a distinct species of men who boldly professed, or who faintly disguised, their implacable hatred to the rest of humankind. Neither the violence of Antiochus, nor the arts of Herod, nor the example of the circumjacent nations, could ever persuade the Jews to associate with the institutions of Moses the elegant mythology of the Greeks. According to the maxims of universal toleration, the Romans protected a superstition which they despised. The polite Augustus condescended to give orders that sacrifices should be offered for his prosperity in the temple of Jerusalem—while the meanest of the posterity of Abraham, who should have paid the same homage to the Jupiter of the capitol would have been an object of abhorrence to himself and to his brethren. But the moderation of the conquerors was insufficient to appease the jealous prejudices of their subjects who were alarmed and scandalised at the ensigns of Paganism, which necessarily introduced themselves into a Roman province. The mad attempt of Caligula to place his own statue in the temple of Jerusalem, was defeated by the unanimous resolution of a people who dreaded death much less than such an idolatrous profanation. Their attachment to the law of Moses was equal to their detestation of foreign religions. The current of zeal and devotion, as it was contracted into a narrow channel, ran with the strength, and sometimes with the fury of a torrent.

This inflexible perseverance, which appeared so odious, so ridiculous to the ancient world, assumes a more awful character since providence has deigned to reveal to us the mysterious history of the chosen people. But the devout and even scrupulous attachment to the Mosaic religion, so conspicuous among the Jews who lived under the

second temple, becomes still more surprising if it is compared with the stubborn incredulity of their forefathers. When the law was given in thunder from Mount Sinai—when the tides of the ocean and the course of the planets were suspended for the convenience of the Israelites; and when temporal rewards and punishments were the immediate consequences of their piety or disobedience, they perpetually relapsed into rebellion against the visible majesty of their divine king, placed the idols of the nations in the sanctuary of Jehovah, and imitated every fantastic ceremony that was practised in the tents of the Arabs, or in the cities of Phœnicia. As the protection of Heaven was deservedly withdrawn from the ungrateful race, their faith acquired a proportionable degree of vigour and purity. The contemporaries of Moses and Joshua had beheld with careless indifference the most amazing miracles. Under the pressure of every calamity, the belief of those miracles has preserved the jews of a later period from the universal contagion of idolatry—and in contradiction to every known principle of the human mind, that singular people seems to have yielded a stronger and more ready assent to the traditions of their remote ancestors, than to the evidence of their own senses.

The Jewish religion was admirably fitted for defence, but it was never designed for conquest; and it seems probable that the number of proselytes was never much superior to that of apostates. The divine promises were originally made, and the distinguishing right of circumcision was enjoined to a single family. When the posterity of Abraham had multiplied like the sands of the sea, the Deity, from whose mouth they received a system of laws and ceremonies, declared himself the proper and as it were the national God of Israel, and with the most jealous care, separated his favourite people from the rest of mankind. The conquest of the land of Canaan was accompanied with so many wonderful and with so many bloody circumstances, that the victorious Jews were left in a state of irreconcilable hostility with all their neighbours. They had been commanded to extirpate some of the most idolatrous tribes, and the execution of the divine will had seldom been retarded by the weakness of humanity. With the other nations they were forbidden to contract any marriages or alliances, and the prohibition of receiving them into the congregation, which in some cases was perpetual, almost always extended to the third, to the seventh, or even to the tenth generation. The obligation of preaching to the gentiles the faith of Moses, had never been

inculcated as a precept of the law—nor were the Jews inclined to impose it on themselves as a voluntary duty. In the admission of new citizens, that unsocial people was actuated by the selfish vanity of the Greeks, rather than by the generous policy of Rome. The descendants of Abraham were flattered by the opinion, that they alone were the heirs of the covenant, and they were apprehensive of diminishing the value of the inheritance, by sharing it too easily with the strangers of the earth. A larger acquaintance with mankind, extended their knowledge without correcting their prejudices; and whenever the God of Israel acquired any new votaries he was much more indebted to the inconstant humour of polytheism than to the active zeal of his own missionaries.—The religion of Moses seems to be instituted for a particular country, as well as for a single nation—and if strict obedience had been paid to the order, that every male, three times in the year, should present himself before the Lord Jehovah, it would have been impossible that the Jews could ever have spread themselves beyond the narrow limits of the promised land. That obstacle was indeed removed by the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem—but the most considerable part of the Jewish religion was involved in its destruction—and the pagans, who had long wondered at the strange report of an empty sanctuary, were at a loss to discover what could be the object, or what could be the instruments, of a worship which was destitute of temples and of altars, of priests and of sacrifices. Yet even in their fallen state, the Jews, still asserting their lofty and exclusive privileges, shunned, instead of courting the society of strangers. They still insisted with inflexible rigour on those parts of the law which it was in their power to practise. Their peculiar distinctions of days, of meats, and a variety of trivial though burdensome observances, were so many objects of disgust and aversion for the other nations, to whose habits and prejudices they were diametrically opposite. The painful and even dangerous rite of circumcision, was alone capable of repelling a willing proselyte from the door of the synagogue.

Under these circumstances, christianity offered itself to the world, armed with the strength of the Mosaic law, and delivered from the weight of its fetters. An exclusive zeal for the truth of religion, and the unity of God, was as carefully inculcated in the new as in the ancient system: and whatever was now revealed to mankind concerning the nature and the designs of the Supreme Being was fitted to increase their reverence for that mysterious doctrine. The

divine authority of Moses and the prophets was admitted, and even established, as the firmest basis of christianity. From the beginning of the world, an uninterrupted series of predictions had announced and prepared the long expected coming of the Messiah, who in compliance with the gross apprehensions of the Jews, had been more frequently represented under the character of a king and conqueror, than under that of a prophet, a martyr, and the son of God. By his expiatory sacrifice, the imperfect sacrifices of the temple were at once consummated and abolished. The ceremonial law, which consisted only of types and figures, was succeeded by a pure and spiritual worship, equally adapted to all climates as well as to every condition of mankind—and to the initiation of blood, was substituted a more harmless initiation of water.

GIBBON.

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